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ABSTRACT

Educational practices often concentrate on rote knowledge of facts while neglecting problem solving skills. When students are encouraged to think critically, analyze, and question they are far better prepared to deal with the future. Classroom debate can be an effective method in all subject areas to achieve this end, helping the student to move from passive acceptance to critical thinking and defending a point of view. Examples describing ways to use debate as an experiential activity across the curriculum include public speaking, general semantics, intercultural communication, communication research, organizational communication, and argumentation and debate. The goal is not to "win" the debate, but to find several issues that relate to each individual class and to use debate as a tool by which the students apply critical thinking. (Contains 17 references.) (SR)

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Classroom Debate as an Experiential Activity Across the Curriculum

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Abstract

Educational practices often concentrate on rote knowledge of facts while neglecting problem solving skills. When students are encouraged to think critically, analyze and question they are far better prepared to deal with the future. This paper addresses the ways in which classroom debate can be an effective method to achieve this end.

Using debate as a classroom assignment helps the student move from passive acceptance to critical thinking and defending a point of view. The paper gives examples of ways to use debate as an experiential activity across the curriculum.

Classroom Debate as an Experiential Activity Across the Curriculum

The educational community is having a renewed interest in teaching critical thinking. Futurists believe that our nation's entrance into a high tech, information society will be marked by constant change. Individuals from all walks of life must be able to think critically in their day to day activities (Thompson & Melancon, 1987).

Labeled as the Information Age, today's technological society produces 2,000 scientific articles each day (Powell, 1987). Scientific knowledge doubles every five years. With this amount of information produced, a new component to literacy emerges. In the past, reading, writing and arithmetic were enough for one to be competent and functional in society. Yet today, a person must be able to evaluate the information critically. According to Norris (1985), today "being able to think critically is a necessary condition for being educated" (p. 40). When students are encouraged to think critically, analyze and question they are far better prepared to deal with the future. This paper will analyze the need for critical thinking, explain how argumentation and debate can fulfill this need, and how debate can be applied as an experiential activity across the curriculum.

Several education reform groups have recognized the importance of critical thinking skills. The Hazen Foundation Report published in 1968 stressed the importance of reasoning skills for first year college students (Keeley, Browne & Kreutzer, 1982). Gadzella, Hartsoe & Harper, (1989) cite several groups which call for increased reasoning as a basic competence with heavy emphasis on critical thinking. These groups include such well known names as the Boyer's Carnegie Foundation, the Rockefeller Commission on Humanities, College Board, and the Task Force on Economic Growth of Education Commission of the States. These reformers point out that to gain control over our environment, we need to become critical thinkers (Powell, 1987).

The result of these reform groups can be assessed from the National Association of Educational progress report that shows that the teaching of higher level thinking skills has not received the attention needed to help students develop competency in these areas (Allen, Wright & Laminack, 1988). Educational practices still concentrate on rote knowledge of facts while neglecting problem-solving skills. According to Moses (1986), the "program development strategy currently popular focuses exclusively on knowledge content while neglecting human growth and development" (p. 113). The result of this philosophy of education may have far reaching impact.

The stark reality of today's education can be seen in the assessment results of critical thinking skills of students in both higher education and the public schools. McKinnon & Renner's study (cited in Powell, 1987) found that 75% of first year college students were lacking in the skills necessary for logical thought. Fourteen years after most of the educational reform groups had labeled critical thinking as a fundamental skill tests suggest that the level of critical thinking is still inadequate in all levels of education (Norris, 1985).

For those motivated students who recognize that thinking skills are important, there are few courses available that teach critical thinking in high schools, colleges, and universities (Gadzella et al., 1989). And even if more critical thinking courses were available, according to Carr (1988), such "layering on" fragments thinking skills. Separate courses fail to build transferable skills of problem solving. The result of these factors is that teaching critical thinking is somewhat ignored in the curriculum.

Before applying debate as a method to teach critical thinking, it is important that critical thinking be defined. Allen, Willmington, & Sprague (1976) present a definition which centers on a practical approach to critical thinking. Critical thinking is,

> The ability to analyze controversial statements; the ability to search out relevant information; the ability to test evidence and conclusions based on evidence; the

> ability to recognize underlying assumptions; the ability to draw and criticize inferences; and the ability to perceive reservations to inferences in argument (p. 382).

This approach creates an active rather than theoretical definition. From this perspective debate becomes an applied definition of critical thinking.

Various studies clearly show that deficiencies in critical thinking result from the lack of instruction in critical thinking skills, not the inherent inability of students to learn such skills (Hudgins & Edelman, 1986; Leadbeater & Dionne, 1981; Moses, 1986; Powell, 1987). Learning to think critically can be developed, but the key is to teach beyond the typical rote knowledge level. Instructors can teach students to evaluate and reflect by emphasizing such experiential skills (Frazier & Caldwell, 1977). Gadzella et al. (1989) recommends that improvement in critical thinking comes by first teaching students the skills of reasoning and then engaging the student in activities that specifically use these skills. One way to do this is through the activity of debate.

Debate, by definition, aims toward teaching critical thinking skills. The textbooks used to teach argumentation and debate in high school and college directly relate the goal of teaching critical thinking as their number one priority and basic premise (Thompson, 1971; Wood, 1986). As the debater critically views the facts, language, hypotheses, beliefs, and assumptions of arguments systematically, many goals of critically thinking are achieved.

In understanding how debate fosters critical thinking, a basic description of the debate format is given. Whatever format is used, the basic duties of evidence, refutation, and logical analysis are similar.

A general description of competitive debate consists of the following procedures. First, a topic called a resolution is given that will be debated by all teams. The affirmative team is for the adoption of the resolution while the negative team is against it. The affirmative team may take whatever position on the resolution that they want. The only

criteria is that the affirmative analysis remain within the boundaries of the resolution, directly linked to it in some manner. The negative team then "clashes" with arguments, countering the affirmative's analysis.

In competitive debate, the participants have a topic to which they must debate both sides. Critically looking at two sides of an issue creates a greater tolerance and awareness to controversial issues. All formats of debate foster this versatility. This forces the participant to synthesize arguments and analyze the logical connection they have to the evidence presented.

By understanding the format of debate it is easy to acknowledge why Allen et al. (1976) stated of debate:

> Debate teaches students to analyze propositions and determine central issues. Debate teaches students to engage in rigorous research. Debate teaches students to carefully assess evidence against standards of relevance, validity and sufficiency. Debate, at its best, teaches students to recognize and evaluate the assumptions on which arguments fundamentally rest. Debate teaches students to draw conclusions in a critically justifiable way, and to detect and refute specious inferences and faulty inductions (p. 382).

Many of these advantages may not be achieved when the entire objective of competitive debate is often winning a trophy at the expense of educational benefits. However, integrating debate into the classroom would not carry this problem. Classroom debate makes school more exciting and provides relief from the standard academic fare.

Involvement in classroom debate has many advantages. One such advantage is that all participants derive some benefit. Even low-achieving students perform well as debaters and benefit from debate experiences. Indeed these students stand to benefit the most from debate within the curriculum (Smith, 1987). Competitive debate has evolved into such a specialized activity that many students don't feel like they can be involved. However,

within the classroom, even the average student can grow from the debate experience. Bile (1984) lists additional advantages:

> Debate: 1) provides preparation for effective participation in free society; 2) offers preparation for leadership; 3) offers training in argumentation; 4) provides for investigation and intensive analysis of significant contemporary problems; 5) develops proficiency in critical thinking; 6) is an integrator of knowledge; 7) develops the ability to make prompt, analytical responses; 8) develops proficiency in purposeful inquiry; 9) emphasizes quality instruction; 10) encourages student scholarship; 11) develops critical listening; 12) encourages mature judgment; 13) develops courage; 14) encourages effective speech composition and delivery; and 15) develops social maturity (p.1).

If the development of student thinking is a primary concern of education, then the curriculum should be organized to facilitate thought processes. Applying debate in a classroom setting is a strong step toward this goal. The strongest application of debate is holistically within several subjects, not the fragmented approach of implementing a single debate class. As Carr so wisely concluded, "Thinking cannot be divorced from content; in fact, thinking is a way of learning content" (1988, p. 69). Students should be taught to think logically, to analyze and compare, to question and evaluate in every course. Skills taught in isolation do little to prepare students for the world that exists outside the classroom.

Debate is an activity that can easily be adapted into school curriculum. For example, in one eleventh grade English class at Upper Perkiomen High School in Pennsburg, PA, debate was so successful that the school included it in all 11th grade English classes and has incorporated it into the humanities' curriculum (Smith, 1987). Supporters of the Upper Perkiomen High School program believe that all students can debate and that this can become a part of any subject area.

To have an understanding of how debate can be used across the curriculum, various applications are given. In adapting debate to an individual course, realize that academic debate can be helpful in providing a format, but also there are many other formats available. Borrowing the format from competitive debate styles (either team, Parliamentary or Lincoln-Douglas) may be too restrictive for an individual class's needs. Taking into consideration class length, size of the class and individual student needs may help create a format that is modified to your class.

Public Speaking

During many political elections, students find themselves ill informed of the issues. In using the small group activity within the basic course a political debate can be held. Students can pick one central issue and then taking on the role of a candidate, present a position in response to that issue. Rebuttals can be given and questions from the "press" can come from the audience. This keeps the whole class actively involved and allows the students to look critically at and defend the current issues. This activity can be in the form of a debate or a class discussion. The key element is that critical thinking is applied to the activity.

General Semantics

For a starting exercise, the entire class can be divided into two groups to debate a basic theoretical issue. One such example that creates an awareness to the complexity of language involves the resolution that language determines thought vs.language conveys thought.

Intercultural Communication

There are many policy and cultural issues within intercultural communication. One possible issue is a resolution concerning multiculturalism vs.the melting pot. Whatever resolution is chosen the result is an increased awareness of our changing cultural values.

Communication Research

In looking at the questions answered within research, students can debate the differences in philosophy between quantitative and qualitative research methods. This helps to overcome the inherent bias that many research classes have in leaning toward one method to the exclusion of the other.

Organizational Communication

A debate involving the entire class can be held with the goal of awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of Scientific Management vs. Human Behavior Management.

Argumentation and Debate

This class might be obvious for the application of debate. Still, the format of the debate can be altered to allow a wider range of student experience. The usual Oxford style team debate takes an inordinate amount of time. Once the issues are researched, the debate itself takes over an hour to be completed. The shortage of class time does not often allow an immediate critique. In addition, depending on the class size, the most debates a student can complete is usually one or two in a semester. To accommodate these problems a format using Parliamentary debate works well to get students involved. Parliamentary debate involves four students, impromptu topics with minimal or no research and lasts only 30 minutes. Speaker responsibilities are specialized as only one student speaks twice in the debate. Each student has either a constructive or a rebuttal and no cross-examination. In using Parliamentary style, each student has time to practice the skills and format used in debate. Though researching is not stressed, Parliamentary debate is a quick application that can prepare students for a more detailed and formal Oxford style debate.

These examples are not all inclusive by any means. In almost any class, the open discussion type debate or a more formal classroom debate can be used. What is important is that two or more sides present an argument and critically look at an issue. The goal is to

find several issues that relate to each individual class and use debate as the tool to which the students experience and apply critical thinking. This can be done in most every course across the curriculum.

The debate format encourages students to take their own approach within the broad resolution topic. Other options for a more personal student approach include possibly getting students involved in choosing the specific topic for debate. Students can submit and vote on a topic that interests them. This will allow for greater motivation in understanding the topic. When the teacher regulates and controls what occurs in the classroom, and assumes the major responsibility for planning and executing instruction, it typically does not prove to be the best environment for enhancing critical thinking (Hudgins & Edelman, 1986). Debate allows students to have an opportunity to discuss their thoughts about all the subjects, issues and ideas they are studying. Debate aids class discussion as rules can be flexible and can be tailored to the arguments that are given.

In each example given, except in the actual argumentation and debate class, the object is not to "win" the debate. The goal is to investigate and analyze. To think critically about the issues involved in each topic. By looking at the advantages and disadvantages of two issues and defending the issue, students come away with a clearer understanding and a greater tolerance to both sides. Within the period of a class, most students will not have the experience to debate both sides of an issue. One of the ways to help students gain an awareness to both sides is to have the students debate against the side in which they personally believe.

As an experiential activity, classroom debate can involve students in a critical and fun way that shares ideas instead of simply playing the often passive role of student. Critical thinking is a goal in the philosophy statement of many universities. Implementing debate across the curriculum can help to achieve that goal. From the authors' experiences, in each instance that debate is applied across these varied courses, the students have stated

that they have grown from the activity. It also provided a break from having to listen to the teacher lecture.

Teaching critical thinking in various classes is by no means unique. Educational reform groups have been advocating a similar suggestion for years. Yet, the approach taken by equating critical thinking directly to argumentation and debate, gives a more concrete approach for students to experience the curriculum. Debate is a viable means of teaching critical thinking as the debate format can be adapted to various levels of the student body and the various subjects taught. Perhaps initiating debate within school curriculum is the first step in achieving the critical thinking approach that ideally should be emphasized.

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